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ABSTRACT

Because the current Council for Educational Technology (CET) open learning systems (OLS) program is ending and the new OLS program being planned has very different concerns, this report reviews the initial program, assesses its impact since 1975, and identifies factors which aided its success as an innovative program. Aims and objectives for each of the project's three phases are given, and the main aspects of the work are generally outlined. Good timing, a clearly identified target group, the early identification of a transferable model, and carefully-considered program objectives are identified as crucial to the effective promotion of open learning systems by project staff. Examples of methods used to overcome inertia in the system which would prevent innovation are outlined. Though the program has not been subject to formal evaluation, a subjective assessment of its major achievements is given. The main problems facing further spread of OLS in public sector institutions are listed, as well as a brief outline of the next stage in CET's OLS work. Twenty-one references are listed. (Author/LMM)

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THE CET OPEN LEARNING SYSTEMS PROGRAMME:

A Contribution to career updating.

by

John Coffey

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THE CET OPEN LEARNING SYSTEMS PROGRAMME: A CONTRIBUTION TO CAREER UPDATING

John Coffey
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Abstract: The current Council for Educational Technology (CET) open learning systems programme ends on 31 March 1983 after which CET will embark on a new OLS programme with very different concerns than hitherto. It seems an appropriate time therefore to review the work to date, to assess its impact, and attempt to identify the most important factors which aided its success as an innovatory programme.

This paper comprises a brief report on the programme as a whole and its achievements since 1976. The aims and objectives for each of the three phases are given. The main aspects of the work are outlined but no attempt is made to describe any part of the programme in detail.

Good timing , a clearly identified target group,the early identification of a transferable model, and carefully considered programme objectives are identified as crucial to the effective promotion of open learning systems by project staff. Examples of methods used to overcome inertia in the system preventing innovation are outlined.

Though the programme has not been subject to formal evaluation, a subjective assessment of its major achievements is given. The main problems facing further spread of open learning systems in public sector institutions are listed. A very brief outline of the next stage in CET's OLS work is given.

Introduction

In the Russell Report, "Adult Education: A Plan for Development", published in 1973, there was a reference to the potential of open learning systems in the education of adults. This was perhaps not surprising since the Open University had been established recently and had already shown that distance teaching using multi-media materials and some face-to-face tuition could be very successful. It might therefore have been expected that an institution similar to the Open University would be proposed for courses below degree level. However, the Russell Report reisted this temptation and proposed the following

> "It is not likely and not reasonably desirable that a permanent institution or a range of institutions like the Open University should be created for adult education below

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degree level. What is desirable is not a super organisation, but an organisational framework". (DES 1973)

CET too, had begun to take an interest in open learning and a brief article by Geoffrey Hubbard, "Analogues of the Open University", took up the Russell challenge and set out some perameters for an open learning system. (Hubbard 1975)

a. It identified mature students seeking academic, vocational or professional training and qualifications as the main target group for open learning.

b. The aim for an Open University analogue would be to make available to students anywhere in the country, courses leading tof a wide range of academic, professional and vocational qualifications at times and in ways that conformed with the students' requirements.

c. Open learning systems would grow from within existing institutions, in particular those in the further education system, and there would be a need for some central initiatives and support to enable them to reach their full potential.

Phase 1

These ideas were presented at a conference on open learning convened by CET in April 1976. The conference urged CET to undertake an investigation into the levels and range of current open learning provision for mature students. The subsequent, but brief investigation unearthed a surprising number of innovative open learning activities in colleges. It also provided sufficient background information to identify criteria by which open learning systems could be described and to map the broad outlines of a national open learning provision. (Davies 1977).

Concurrent with this investigation was another project in which CET was involved. CET joined with the Post Office (now British Telecom) and the Technician Education Council in the development of learning materials for an external students programme in Telecommunications. This project gave a detailed insight into the problems concerned with establishing open learning systems inside further education establishments and the role of educational technologists in learning materials development teams outside the OU. (Coffey 1978)

From these beginnings it was possible to plan a second and a much more ambitious phase of the programme to promote the widespread development of open learning systems.

Phase II

The aims for the second phase of the programme were to...

a. Increase awareness in further, adult and continuing

education of the contribution open learning systems could make to education and training.

b. Produce guidelines, evaluated case studies, or studies of new open learning experiments, on which open learning developers could base their plans.

c. Propose action necessary for the continued development of OLS.

Phase II of the OLS programme ran for 19 months from September 1978. A list of projects which comprise the programme and their relationship to the aims and objectives is given in figure one.

Figure 1 about here

The programme was remarkably successful. The very few open learning experiments under way at the beginning of phase two were little known and isolated fromn each other. By the end of the programme, some 50 further education colleges had begun to develop open learning arrangements of some sort and many other colleges had expressed positive interest. Perhaps most important of all, was the increasing acceptance by senior policy makers in local authorities, validating bodies, teachers' unions, and others that open learning was a subject worth considering. A climate of interest was created in which it was possible for ideas such as James Prior's interest in an "Open Tech" to take root.

A most effective part of the programme was the series of conferences for Principals and other senior staff from colleges of further and adult education, members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate, and local education authority advisory staff. These conferences were held in every region of the UK. Not only was there an effective dissemination of information about open learning and feedback to CET of a very positive and supportive response to CET's work, but requests for help arising from the conferences were followed up with practical support. This was given through sponsoring of consultancy visits, organisation of various typs of training workshop, and through the National Extension College Open Learning Unit. (Jointly funded by NEC and CET).

Probably the most important outcome of phase two was our own deeper understanding of the complex network of relationships which would exist between interested agencies if the "organisational framework", hinted at by Russell, were to be achieved. The Russell phrase implied that existing institutions such as colleges, libraries, advice centres, broadcasting organisations, publishers, correspondence colleges, and so on

have the basic skills required to operate open learning systems provided that the appropriate links could be established. It became clear from our own regional conferences and other aspects of our work that despite the undoubted existence of this considerable body of untapped expertise, and the entrepreneurial spirit in further and adult eucation colleges, and elsewhere, some central co-ordination would be required. An early attempt to show the relationships between different parts of an Open Learning System is shown in Figure 2. (Coffey 1979)

Figure 2 about here

Information exchange, pump priming of learning material development, training support, and mechanisms to identify the needs of students and industry would be required. Many of the financial arrangements on which education and training was (and continues to be) based were inappropriate for open learning.

Phase III

In order to help find solutions to these and other related problems, CET agreed to support a third phase of the open learning systems programme for three years from April 1980. The programme was given two main aims, one concerned with "policy makers", and the other with "operational" questions. The aims were...

a. **Policy making:** to continue to supply policy makers with information about the potential and need for OLS, to keep them up to date with developments, and to alert them to problems concerning policy; to consult with other organisations about the need for nationally co-ordinated support for OLS, and to ,submit appropriate action recommendations to Government.

b. **Operational:** to encourage support and evaluate developmental work in OLS administration and management, learning materials design, and staff training, in order to create a foundation on which open learning opportunities can become an established part of further education provision, and to leave good working examples in the field.

The projects supported during phase three and their relationship to the aims of the programme are shown on figure three.

Figure 3 about here

The start of phase three unfortunately co-incided with a

substantial cut in CET's Government grant. The net result was a cut in the OLS programme budget of 35%. Nonetheless, it was possible to concentrate effort on production of a consultative document (CET 1980) to assess the degree of support there might be for some form of national co-ordination and promotion of open learning systems based on existing institutions. This consultative document was issued in December 1980 to more than 200 representative bodies with interests in education and training. With few exceptions, those consulted strongly supported the CET recommendation that Government should nominate and support an existing agency or agencies, or form a new one to take responsibility for the development and continuation of open learning systems. Further, the Council was urged to emphasise that open learning systems should as far as possible, be fully integrated into existing education and training provision.

At the same time, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) had been asked by the Minister for Employment, James Prior, to put together proposals for an "Open Tech". It has been possible to work closely with MSC and provide advice and consultancy throughout the development of their programme.

As Richard Freeman has pointed out in his article "Reflections on an "Open Tech, the "Open Tech" was a long time in coming and went through several important metamorphoses during its development (Freeman 1982). In the early stages, a central institution, similar in many ways to the Open University, was envisaged. However, the CET programme had demonstrated that other collaborative models based on existing institutions were more likely to meet the requirements of an "Open Tech" and it is not really surprising that MSC adopted a model which embodied many of the principles set out in the CET consultative document (MSC 1982). The fact that "Open Tech" was able to begin its work in a climate which had already been prepared to receive it is perhaps the most important legacy of the CET programme.

Other bodies too havge worked with the programme. The Further Education Curriculum Development and Review Unit, the Technician Education Council, Business Education Council, the Scottish Council for Educational Technology, and some local authorities are among those which now put the promotion and development of open learning as important priorities for their work.

Training of staff in open learning schemes in the tutoring and counselling skills, so important to the support of independent learners, has also been a high priority in this phase of work. Training materials have been prepared (Lewis 1981) and promulgated in a series of regional staff development workshops. Roger Lewis describes this aspect of the activity in another paper at this conference. This programme has also supported a study of the problems students have in working within open learning schemes, an aspect of the work Anita Morris describes in another paper at this conference.

Throughout phase three, CET continued to support individual

colleges and training establishments which set up open learning schemes. Advice and consultancy on administrative questions was provided through an Information Unit at Coombe Lodge. A variety of workshops were set up to train staff for specific roles within new developments. A newsletter was established to provide a forum in which open learning systems developers could promulgate their own work and ideas. A register of information about open learning schemes in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland was put together (Monaco and Latcham 1982). (SCET has produced a guide to open learning schemes in Scotland).

At the end of phase three, some 200 institutions, which before 1976 had taken little interest in open learning, had set up one or more open learning schemes. While many of these schemes can trace their origin directly to the influence of the CET programme, it is now more and more the case that institutions receive their advice and guidance from one or more of the other national bodies including a professional association, The Open Learning Federation, which have begun to support the interests of those working in open learning.

The Innovation Strategy

The open learning systems programme, at modest cost (three hundred and ten thousand pounds since 1976), has been very successful in stimulating innovation in further and adult education and in training. How was this done?

The Starting Points

It is easy to be wise after the event, but one of the main factors was good timing. At the time the programme started, the success of the Open University was becoming widely recognised, and thought was being given to how similar techniques might be used elsewhere. Demographic trends indicated that there would be spare capacity in further education colleges unless new clientelle from the adult population could be found. Awareness of the implications of widespread use of new technologies on training and employment was beginning to stir. HMI had set up a study group on development of distance learning. It was reasonable to suppose that at a future stage Government would have to fund some development to provide for the education and training needs of mature students, and that open learning systems might be among the methods proposed.

Given all these factors, it would have been difficult to fail. Nonetheless, there were pit falls to be avoided. Dissipating limited resources on a programme which attempted to satisfy all needs at once was one such. CET however, decided to focus its efforts on one group only, namely, mature motivated adults seeking recognised qualifications below degree level. If schemes could be begun under that fairly precise umbrella, then they could become later the starting points for broader schemes.

Good management early on ensured that the objectives for the

programme were clear throughout. Not only was there the work by Geoffrey Hubbard, referred to above, but the Assistant Director responsible for the open learning programme, Leslie Gilbert, insisted at the beginning of phase two that project staff develop a paper analysing the OLS concept and its implications. This analysis (Coffey 1977) and subsequent work done by Doug Spencer (Spencer 1980) kept the aims of the programme firmly in view throughout.

The early identification of "FlexiStudy" as an OLS model which colleges as transferable to their own situations (Rowlands 1977), and the support of that model by an innovatory correspondence college, NEC, helped would be innovators to experiment (Sachs 1980). This enabled many individuals aquire experience of OLS and encouraged them to identify closely with national innitiatives.

Avoiding Catch 22

Despite the fortunate timing, a clearly identified target group, and clear objectives, and a model, the programme, like so many other innovatory projects before it, was faced in many educational and training institutions, with the familiar buck passing arguments in favour of doing nothing. Almost any individual, whether he or she be teacher, administrator, advisor, or union official, would claim to appreciate the value of open learning but assert that some other group or individual would prevent it happening. The strategy adopted in the programme to combat this inertia was therefore to proceed on a broad front providing, as far as practicable, appropriately focussed help and advice to all groups concerned.

It is not possible here to go into detail of all the activities undertaken but some examples illustrate the point. (Some of these have already been mentioned above.)

Regional Conferances:

LEA advisers and College Principals were invited to attend regional conferences to promote the idea of open learning. At these conferences participants were given a genuine opportunity to help shape the thinking which eventually resulted in the production of the CET Consultative Document. (CET 1980)

Consultancy:

Colleges and LEA's which wished to embark on open learning experiments were given access to consultants with special expertise. Consultants were selected from the staff of existing schemes and therefore, not only understood the concerns and anxieties of their clients from first-hand experience, but also were perceived by their clients as credible. CET staff retained a degree of detachment throughout. The 'honest broker' role was very helpful in discussions with groups at all levels in the system.

NATFHE:

The teachers' union principally concerned, NATFHE (National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education), were understandably hesitant about accepting OLS. Rumour had it that politicians saw open learning as a neat way to reduce the size of FE! The programme therefore, accepted the validity of the concern and set up a joint CET/NATFHE study group to ensure that each group knew what was going on. The programme supported a special conference on open learning systems for union representatives which was very well attended. The result of this activity was qualified support throughout, a positive response to the CET consultative document, and to MSC proposals for an 'Open Tech', and the publication of a Union statement favourable to open learning (NATFHE 1981)

Learning Material:

Shortage of suitable learning material over a wide range of subjects has been a major problem throughout. Among the many activities undertaken by the programme were...

a. Studies of the role of educational technologists in writing teams (Coffey 1978; Morris 1981)

b. Encouraging correspondence colleges to collaborate with colleges in development of OLS.

c. Providing training workshops to groups of staff in individual colleges and consortia.

d. Developing new technologies for learning material generation such as collaborative intensive writing workshops.

e. Publication of Guidelines on "How to Write Distance Learning material". (CET 1980)

Tutoring:

The problems of tutoring were also examined and novel techniques developed though cuts in funding prevented completion of the task. (Gibbs 1981)

Resources:

The OLS information and consultancy unit at Coombe Lodge provided access to papers on staff resource questions. (Birch and Latcham 1981)

There were many other activities undertaken in the programme but the guiding principle has always been first to identify the problem and then find appropriate solutions. This approach has been particularly appropriate in technician education where the needs of different industries have placed specific constraints on

course providers. This has already been discussed in detail in the report on a project on Open Learning for Technicians sponsored by MSC and TEC and managed by the CET OLS programme. (Guildford Educational Services 1982). The problem solving approach has also been taken up by the MSC in the Open Tech Programme. (MSC 1982)

Discussion

As is so often the case in development projects of this kind, no formal evaluation of the programme was undertaken other than project reviews within CET. Therefore, the detailed assessment of effectiveness of the programme as a whole has to be subjective though there are evaluation reports on some of the specific activities within it. Some very public results do however confirm that the programme has been successful in achieving its main aims.

Nonetheless, there has been a widespread adoption of OLS as a means of provision and much of this innovative activity can be traced directly to the work of the programme.

The Government too has decided to fund a major development programme for technicians through the MSC and, while the initial impetus for the innovation may have begun elsewhere: the approaches eventually adopted for its implementation are traceable to the programme.

Open learning and distance learning are now becoming important considerations in the DES PICKUP programme through its links with the Open University and the Further Education and Curriculum Review Unit (FEU). These developments too are traceable to the programme.

OLS models other than FlexiStudy are now receiving much more attention. Perhaps the most significant of these is the workshop mode developed at Bradford College of HE which uses many of the princples of operation used in programmed learning centres.

CET is therefore pleased with its work, particularly so since the positive responses have come both from policy makers as well as from practitioners within the system. This breadth of response augurs well for the eventual institutionalisation and integration of the innovations within the education and training systems.

It would, however, be wrong to try to give the impression that the work is finished and that there is no further need for development.

The initiatives by Government, LEA'S, colleges, and training institutions at present meet the needs of a tiny proportion of those who might wish to study through open learning systems. This is very worrying since the youth training initiative of the

MSC is swamping innovative potential of FE colleges and, for a time at least, is likely to push the development of OLS well down the priority list.

Despite the positive and welcome support for 'Open Tech' and PICKUP by Government, there is still no recognition by Government that OLS and new information technologies make it absurd to deprive anyone of study or training opportunity simply on the grounds that the potential student lives in the wrong place or cannot study at a particular time.

There has been no positive Governmental encouragement to LEA's to support development of OLS. The existing accounting procedures used in education and training continue to be inappropriate to open learning. In fact, these procedures often inhibit developments.

The dependence of OLS on independent learning material requires an element of risk capital before students can be enrolled and pay fees, at present the most obvious means to repay the costs of developing such material. Most public institutions are governed by annual budgetting arrangements and find means to recycle funds in order to support development work hard, and often impossible, to establish.

In my view, and that of many others, a need for co-ordination of open learning developments remains, despite the undoubted central roles that "Open Tech" ,and bodies such as the Open Learning Federation will exercise. The argument put in the CET Consultative Document for co-ordination remains unanswered.

At a more practical level, there are a number of promising methods and ideas tried in the programme which need further development. It is to be hoped that opportunities for this will occur in the "Open Tech" programme, FEU projects, and the work of the Open Learning Federation. In particular, approaches to development of learning materials through intensive writing workshops and use of study guides, methods of training OLS tutors devised by Graham Gibbs (Gibbs 1981), and approaches to pre-entry counselling all need considerable further work.

The Future for CET's Involvement in Open Learning

CET is not a body which takes responsibility for course provision. It is a development agency and it reduces its active involvement in specific developments once there are others able and willing to carry CET initiatives forward. This stage has been reached in the case of OLS and the current phase of the programme will therefore end on 31 March 1983.

A new and very different programme begins in April 1983. The concept permeating this programme will be student negotiated learning. This concept links work on learning exchanges, student self help groups, study circles, open learning in small companies, as well giving an opportunity to explore the

extraordinary potential for application of information technologies in open learning.

Some continued support for OLS in colleges will continue to be provided but at a much lower level. A series of booklets on different aspects of OLS development, prepartion of learning material, and OLS tutoring will be published; The newsletter, "OLS News", will continue to be published; Workshops on tutoring in OLS and on preparation of learning material will be held from time to time; But the development effort will be concentrated on new work.

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COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

Open Learning Systems - Phase II

Relationship of Aims, Objectives and Activities.

AIMS	OBJECTIVES	ACTIVITIES: OLS Consultant Reports - Lectures - Visits	Comparative Case Studies	Student Problems Investigation	Open College Evaluation	Tutor/Counselling Investigation	Cost Analysis Study	Course Design Projects	Workshops	NEC Open Learning Development Unit	Distance Learning for Technicians	Regional Conferences	Seminars	Publications	Advisory Panel
to increase awareness in FE, adult and continuing education of the contribution OLS can make to education and training.	To encourage the establishment in principle of OLS experiments in a few colleges as yet uninvolved, and advise during the early stages of development.	●						●	●	●		●			
	To monitor and report the progress of these experiments.		●											●	
	To support activities which will encourage debate of OLS issues.	●	●		●		●		●		●	●	●	●	
	To list contacts established during Phase II for inclusion in the CET information service/	●													
to produce guidelines, evaluated case studies, or studies of new OLS experiments/ demonstrations, on which OLS developers can base their plans.	To describe possible solutions to the six problem areas identified in Phase I, i.e., concerning student study problems, information networks, tutoring and counselling, course design, costing and administration.		●	●		●	●	●		●	●				
	To assess the validity and transferability of these solutions.		●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●				
	To produce OLS guidelines on study skills, tutoring, counselling, costing and administration.		●	●		●	●	●		●	●				
to propose action necessary for the continued development of OLS.	To distinguish between problems which can be solved using existing resources and those which require new arrangements.	●	●								●		●		●
	To report the outcomes of debate.	●										●	●	●	●
	To propose action for the dissemination of case study and other material produced in Phase II.														●
	To propose action necessary for the continued development of OLS using the results of Phase II activities as evidence.	●										●	●	●	●

Figure 1

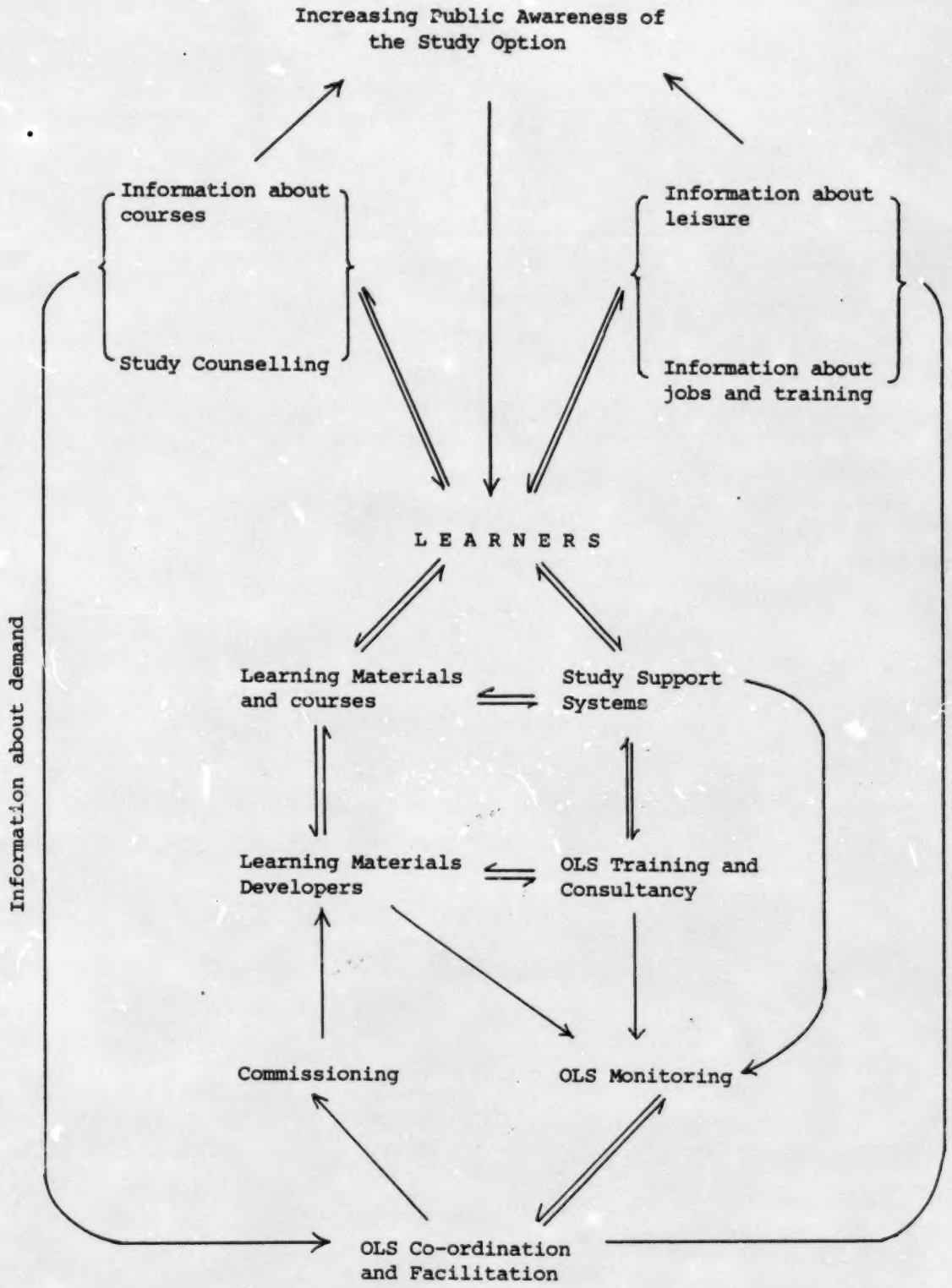

Increasing Public Awareness of the Study Option
Information about courses
Study Counselling
Information about leisure
Information about jobs and training
L E A R N E R S
Learning Materials and courses
Study Support Systems
Learning Materials Developers
OLS Training and Consultancy
Commissioning
OLS Monitoring
OLS Co-ordination and Facilitation
Information about demand
Information about need

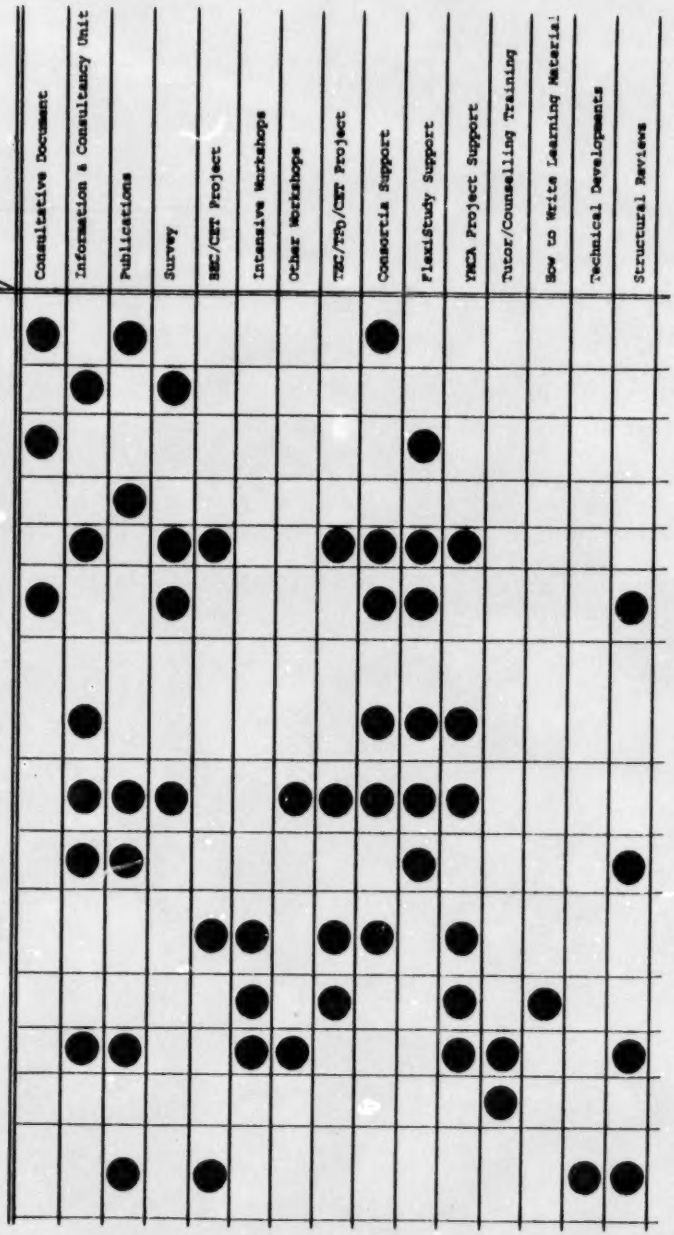
FIGURE 2

PHASE III

PROJECTS

PHASE III

OBJECTIVES



Policy Making

(a) To increase awareness of policy makers of the potential of OLS for mature students.

(b) To study ways of assessing likely demand for specific open learning courses.

(c) To encourage the removal of administrative, financial and other constraints (e.g. acceptability of qualifications by professional bodies) on open learning provision.

(d) Further to develop techniques for comparative cost-effectiveness measurement.

(e) To co-ordinate the CET OLS programme with relevant work in CET and elsewhere.

(f) To encourage the development of arrangements to meet the information needs of organisations providing, and individuals seeking, open learning courses.

Operational

Administration and Management

(a) To help establish and evaluate open learning courses based on FE institutions

(b) To make consultancy advice available to those concerned with the administration and management of open learning arrangements.

(c) To help develop tested administration and management systems for open learning in colleges.

Learning Materials Design and OLS Training

(a) To encourage the co-ordination and collaborative production of learning materials.

(b) To establish arrangements for the design, use and dissemination of learning materials.

(c) To make consultancy advice available.

(d) To develop arrangements for the provision of OLS training with appropriate training agencies.

Technological Applications

To commission studies of the potential of various technological developments for OLS.